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AUTHOR Gallagher, Jan; Coy, Doris Rhea
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ABSTRACT

School counselors are usually the first ones to encounter students who are having problems. From interviews with students and parents in crisis, communication between them is the primary concern. This paper describes Communication Anxiety Therapy (CAT), a process used to help develop communication within families. It states that CAT is filled with process strategies that encourage, engage, and empower students and families to positively deal with the stress in their lives. Each CAT session is designed to take its team members through a series of developmental learning phases. The sessions involve warm-up activities to help set the tone of the group, problem-solving activities, followed by assessing individual roles and group responses. The paper explains that it is participatory communication led by professional school counselors in their emerging role of providing counseling to the family unit. (JDM)

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A New Emerging Role for School Counsellors:
Communication Activity Therapy (CAT) for Families
By

Jan Gallagher & Doris Rhea Coy, Ph.D.

Janice Gallagher is a retired school counselor and administrator in the Harlandale Independent School District in San Antonio. She is currently serving as the President-Elect of the American School Counselor Association and as a consultant to school districts. She has served as President of the Texas Counseling Association and the Texas School Counselor Association. Jan is an accomplished workshop presenter and has made presentations on the local, state, national, and international level.

1710 Brogan

San Antonio, TX 78232 USA

210: 494-6498

Doris Rhea Coy, Ph.D. is an assistant professor at the University of North Texas in Denton, Texas. Her areas of expertise are school counseling and career development. She is also the co-director of the Adjunct ERIC clearinghouse in school counseling. She is a past president of the American Counseling Association and the American School Counselor Association. Doris is an accomplished presenter and has made presentations on the local, state, national, and international level. Doris was the lead editor of the monograph, Toward the Transformation of Secondary School Counseling.

University of North Texas

P.O. Box 311337

Denton, TX 76203-1337 USA

940: 565-4871

coy@coefs.coe.unt.edu

With school enrollment at an all-time high in America with 52.5 million students in 1998, education will continue to be one of the nation's greatest growth industries well into the next century, according to projections by the U.S. Department of Education. Rising birth rates and a spurt in childbearing among the baby boom generation, as well as immigration and declining dropout rates, school enrollment is expected to grow over the next decade. To accommodate the growth, the U.S. Department of Education in 1997 estimated that 6,000 new schools, 150,000 new teachers, plus other school support personnel will be needed.

The high school level will see most of the growth in enrollment. The U.S. Department of Education has projected a 13 percent increase at the secondary level between 1997 and 2007. Middle school enrollment in grades six through eight has been projected to grow 5 percent.

Elementary school enrollment is projected to remain relatively steady, growing less than 1 percent over the next 10 years.

With an increased enrollment in U.S. schools, it can only be assumed from other data collected that there will be increased opportunities for school counselors to work with students and their families. Data reflective of this assumption is published in the 1998 Kids Count Data Book from the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

*An estimated 3.5 million children under the age of 13 spend sometime alone at home each week and it is unknown how many other children are periodically unsupervised even for short periods of time.

*Approximately 23 million children under the age of 13 live in families with income of less than 85 percent of their state median family income.

*Teen homicides increased from 1,602 in 1985 to 3,292 in 1995 (almost double).

*Nationally, the teen birth rate increased from 31 per 1,000 females age 15 to 17 in 1985 to 36 in 1995.

*In 1996, 19 percent (about one-fifth) of everyone arrested for a violent crime were under 18 years of age.

*The juvenile violent crime arrest rate increased from 305 arrests per 100,000 youth age 10-17 in 1985 to 507 in 1995.

*Nationwide, 10 percent of teens age 16-19 were high school dropouts in 1995, compared to 11 percent in 1985.

*The percent of families with children headed by a single parent increased from 22 percent in 1985 to 26 percent in 1995.

What do the few statistics cited above indicate? The response is that along with a growing school population there are in some areas growing problems in our society. Children and their families are often confronted with problems and issues that cause distress. What happens when the children in these families have problems so intense that their behavior in school becomes

unacceptable and leads to suspension or expulsion from the school?

In San Antonio, an urban city with a population in excess of one million people, the Bexar County Juvenile Justice Alternative Programs reports the following:

*In the 1996-97 school year, 242 youth were sent to the county's alternative school for serious and persistent misbehaviors, that number increased to 280 in 1997-98.

* The number of students found in possession of drugs and sent to the county's alternative school in 1996-97 was 65. That number increased to 133 students in 1997-98.

* Students found in possession of weapons (knives, guns, etc.) was 66 in 1996-97 and increased to 77 in 1997-98.

* Students found guilty of assault in 1996-97 were 12 and in 1997-98 increased to 15.

Each day in Texas schools from 4-6 percent of its enrolled students are not in attendance. According to the Texas Education Agency data, the attendance rate for Texas schools in 1996-95 was 95.1 percent. Local school data indicates that approximately 2 percent of the students not in attendance are truant from school.

As professional school counselors, we are in the unique position of being the first, in many instances, to encounter students with problems. Those problems can vary from academic, personal, social, career, family to any other conceivable issue. As the students encounter problems and as counselors work with students to assist them in solving and overcoming these problems, parents must be included as solutions are developed.

Parents are key to keeping their children in school as productive successful students. Yet today, school counselors know that from time to time every family, regardless of their ability to be seemingly self-sufficient, needs counseling assistance. Families almost daily cope with increasing stressors. Parental responsibilities can be emotionally, physically, and sometimes financially overwhelming. Despite the best intentions, many parents find themselves facing tremendous obstacles as they attempt to understand their children and as they attempt to meet their needs. As parents struggle to be effective, conflicts can occur and the family structure is then in peril, thus arise the need for family counseling.

When interviewing family members in preparing for family counseling, the area which parents

and their children identify as a primary area of concern is "communication." Parents say that students don't listen and students respond that parents don't hear what they are saying nor do they understand. There are simple counseling activities that can be utilized to assist families in learning to communicate, re-establish loving, caring relationships and building or re-building trust.

One of the processes used in developing communications within families is Communication Activity Therapy (CAT). Professional school counselors have the skills, and knowledge to become facilitators for family groups which include parents and children. The incorporation of professional school counselors into family counseling opens new doors of opportunities in school counseling and creates new roles for school counselors who lead these groups.

"CAT" has been successful utilized in the Harlandale School District by the administrators and school counselors involved in the Family Counseling Program offered on regularly scheduled evenings. Data collected indicates that both parents and their children have benefited from this program. For those taking part in "CAT", discipline cases were reduced and there were no repeat participants (245 families participated from March 1995 thru August 1997). Students returned to their home schools successfully completing the school year without further incidents.

Let's look at "CAT" and learn how to implement it. CAT is a series of activities which requires mental, social, and limited physical involvement. Group problem solving skills are employed which offer the opportunity for individuals to share experiences and learn from one another. Through "CAT", participants have the opportunity to experience personal achievement, have fun, and participate in a pleasant experience. Group problem solving skills are employed to help develop team building, individual confidence, goal setting (long range and short range), conflict resolution, decision making and communication.

Families learn skills by attempting to complete tasks together as a team. When the responsibility for learning rests with the learner (learner-centered), the learners will stretch themselves in unexpected ways. At the end of the therapy activities, family members depart with a sense of satisfaction and of having accomplished something personally meaningful. This kind of satisfaction can be achieved only if the family members are engaged and empowered, not lectured.

Activities are designed to develop participant empowerment in stages. First, team members are presented with a situation or challenge and must develop options or strategies for solving the problem. The solution may or may not be obvious. The activities challenge the participants' stated aspirations. Such a challenge motivates the participants to respond collectively, bonding together to reach a solution.

At the conclusion of the activity, the team will be excited with its success. Participants are then asked to review and examine what happened and what role did each play in the activity and its subsequent solution. Team members are asked to share their feelings and understandings of the process, their roles, the pitfalls of the experience, and the subsequent solution.

A typical CAT session is designed to take its team members through a series of developmental learning phases. Usually, the session begins with an informal and relaxing activity and is created by getting participants involved through a "warm-up" or "ice-breaker." The goal is to create a welcome and comfortable environment. The activities, included in this initial session involve games and stretches/movements which are non-competitive in nature and have little or no problem solving (initiatives) component. Such activities help to prepare team members by providing opportunities to-

- *know other group members,
- *set the tone for an informed non-competitive atmosphere,
- *develop group cooperation,
- *begin to develop a sense of trust,
- *develop a sense of body and an awareness of movement, and
- *warm-up physically.

Following the warm-up activity/ies and after the group has relaxed and laughed together, participants are ready to start the trust-building process by taking part in problem-solving activities. Participants are encouraged to develop some basic methods in learning to take care of each other. Activity challenges focus on group problem-solving skills. These activities require team members to collectively solve challenges as a team. Opportunities are provided in the area of-

- *team building,
- *self/group esteem, self confidence,
- *goal setting (short and long range),
- *conflict resolution,
- *defining group roles
- *decision-making
- *trust development
- *risk-taking as a family member,
- *practicing self and social responsibility, and
- *creative communication.

In facilitating CAT, the sequencing of activities is crucial. Counselor facilitators must consider the group balance, using their group counseling skills so that all participants have a role, are engaged and involved in the activities. Group members must be guided and encouraged to stretch their mental and physical abilities. Only through active participation can group members become empowered to care for themselves and others.

CAT, in simple terms or steps, involves the following key elements:

- * warm-up, briefing activities,
- *initiatives, challenges, problem-solving activities,

*debriefing, assessing individual roles, group responses.

Participants who have been involved in CAT have made the following statements in their evaluations:

"This is the first time our family has played together...." (Parent of 3 teens)

"My mother isn't as boring as I thought she was, she can laugh," (Teenager)

"I learned to listen with my ears and my eyes." (Parent of child with drug problem.)

"My father is talking to me. Used to be he talked at me." (Male teen suspended for truancy.)

"I didn't know my dad really loved me til he hugged me when we did the circle talk." (Male teen)

CAT is activity filled with process strategies which encourage, engage, and empower students and their families to deal positively with the stressor in their lives. It is participatory communication led by professional school counselors in their new emerging role in providing counseling to the family unit.

References

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